The Trail of the Free Slaves

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Downtown in Scouttown, Georgia, lived a white man named Hudson Cooper. He was 47 years old and 6 feet tall with brown hair and strips of white hair. He owned a regular-sized 2-story brown house where he lived alone. On this warm and humid May day, he sat on an airchair on his somewhat desolate porch, relaxed, with an iced tea in his steady hand. He often sat here on nice days, looking out into the surrounding trees of his neighborhood.

You could hear the clanking and thumping of the passing carriages. The carriages mainly contained corn and cotton going to the neighboring town of Canfield.

But there were sometimes metal carriages with thick bars transporting 5-10 slaves. Hudson found owning a slave a horrible action. He believed that slaves should have the same rights that he had. He somehow wanted to help slaves escape, but didn't know how.

A couple of lengthy hours passed by when Hudson heard men yelling loudly from what seemed like down the street behind the trees. It sounded like 3 drunkards had gotten into a fight. Then, suddenly, a normal-sized African who looked about 28 years old came running around the corner of one of the trees. He seemed to be darting straight for Hudson! A few moments later, the African was at Hudson's heel.

"Please let me hide in your house! They're chasing me!" gasped the man.

Without asking, Hudson instantly knew this man was a slave by his colored skin and ripped-up clothing. Finally, Hudson could help a slave!

Hudson quickly set his iced tea down, ushered the slave through the front door, and locked it. He had to come up with a hiding place for this man quickly. Wait, there was a loose floorboard near the stairs in the hallway.

He guided the slave to the stairs and clawed away at the floorboards. The nail on his ring finger caught the edge of the loose one. He flung the board up, which flew across the air 3 feet. He instructed the slave to crawl into the black chasm in the floor. The slave slid like a seal into the 4-foot drop.

Hudson picked the board up and put it back in place as well as he could. Everything was fine now, he thought. He walked to the kitchen to get some food and water for the slaves, but outside, he heard the yells getting louder and louder. He thought for a moment and then realized that they were slave hunters. The slave under his floor had probably escaped a plantation. He had to get that slave out of his house or else the slave would be captured, and he would be fined for hiding a slave!

He sprinted back to the hallway and peeled at the floorboards when, abruptly, a window shattered, and the door was blown open. “They’re coming for the slave!” He muttered under his breath. He tore the loose board up and tripped on his foot. He then accidentally plopped down into the floor. The stomping of boots on the floor grew louder and louder. It was too late to escape the house now. Hudson reached up back through the hole and slammed the board back down.

“Hey, where are you?” Hudson whispered into the darkness.

“Here. I’ll come to you,” replied a familiar voice. “What's your name?” he asked.

“Hudson, Hudson Cooper. What's yours?”

“Homer Sampson. My owner’s name is Jim-“

Homer went silent. Both he and Hudson heard the slow clacking of boots directly above them. If they made a single sound, they would be caught.

Hudson glanced upward and was horror-struck. The floorboard wasn't closed properly, so there was a crack down the middle. He wanted nothing more than to fix it, but that would give their location away. The sound of boot stomping sharpened and then came to a halt.

Hudson thought he heard the men mumbling something about an Underground Railroad and Billy someone. He had heard something about the Underground Railroad one time or another. The footsteps started pacing back toward the front of the house. Hudson and Homer waited a minute to confirm that those men had left.

Hudson kicked the board up and let Homer climb out before he did. He wiped around to face the front of the house. His eyes widened as he saw 3 grity-looking men at the end of the hallway, staring right back at them.

"Well, well, well. Look who we've stumbled upon. Homer, you need to go back to the plantation with us. And your friend is going to be fined for attempting to help a slave escape," said the biggest man out of the gang. "Did you think you could take the Underground Railroad?" he interrogated Homer.

"What even is the Underground Railroad?" asked Hudson.

"Uh. The Underground Railroad is a series of stations with conductors who help slaves escape to the North. I don't understand how it works as it's secret," the man replied, clearly annoyed.

"We are not doing that," retorted Hudson.

In the corner of Homer's eye, he saw the man to the right of the strong guy, pulling a pistol out from under his shirt. The guy aimed it at him and Hudson. Homer leaped forward and side-kicked the gun out of the guy's hand. The 2 other guys took offense to this and tried to punch back, but Homer blocked it with his elbow.

Hudson turned around and nudged Homer to tell him to run down the hallway, to the door around the corner. They sprinted as fast as they could and reached the corner. Just as the two turned the corner for the back door, another rough-looking man was blocking the way.

The man put out his hand to choke them, but Hudson grabbed Homer by the side of his left arm and hurled them both out a window beside them.

They tumbled onto the cold grass, then, like clockwork, stood up and sprinted across the yard. They had somehow not gotten any shards of glass on them. They hopped the splintery brown wooden fence and raced onto the street. Without looking back, they kept running until they were at the border of the town. Where would they go? Where would they sleep? All of these questions raced through Hudson's head.

"I think we may need to sneak into town to get horses," he suggested.

"Yeah, we may," Homer replied.

Just as they started to sneak back into town, Hudson noticed a group of 23 black people in dirty clothing, carefully tracking through the woods over yonder.

It seemed that Homer saw it, too, because he remarked, "Say, who do you think those people are? Gypsys?"

"No. They seem… very secretive," Hudson answered back. "Looks like they're heading northward."

"Let's just follow them and see what they are up to."

A loud gunshot rang out behind them, which signified that the slave hunters had followed Hudson's & Homer's footprints and were shooting at them. So the two bounced through the forest, occasionally hiding behind trees so as not to be seen by anyone. Just as they were getting closer, the

group of black people kept looking at them, confused about why a white and a black man were running toward them.

Upon arriving at the group of people, Hudson and Homer were bombarded with questions.

"Attention, everyone," Hudson announced into the crowd, "this man, Homer Sampson, is running from his owner. Is there any way somebody can help this man get to freedom?"

"Why, yes! There is!" yelled a short, energetic, raspy young white woman at the front of the group. "He can travel with us on the Underground Railroad! We help any slaves escape to freedom."

Finally, Hudson had successfully helped a slave! But wait, if he went back to Scouttown, he would be fined and arrested for aiding a slave in an escape.

"I might come as well," he told the woman.

"The more, the merrier," she said, smiling. "Ok. So, here is the breakdown of our journey." She pulled a map out of her front pocket. "We are currently in Scouttown, Georgia. We are going to travel through southeastern Tennessee, straight through Eastern Kentucky, up to Southern Indiana, where the slaves will be free!"

"Before we go, what is your name?" Hudson politely asked.

"Where are my manners! My name is Claira Top, your conductor."

And so the journey began. Claira pointed out different types of trees and bushes that dotted the forest floor. The slaves sang spirituals, which sounded like this:

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home;
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home;

Tell all my friends I'm coming too,
Coming for to carry me home.

Swing Low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

Homer tended to goof around with the younger slaves. But he still constantly thanked Hudson for helping him escape to the Underground Railroad.

40 days into the journey, they reached their first house. It was a small, straw cottage with a bamboo door. Its roof was thickly packed straw held together by something like strips of rubber.

A man greeted them with a naturally cool face and long, white hair. His name was Bon Anchovi. He wore a buttoned-up sweater with jam stains on it. The group slept scattered around in his living room. Bon made sure that at least some coals were burning on the fire to keep the group warm. In the morning, the man took a large potato sack from a shelf and handed everyone a piece of bread from it. The group said their goodbyes to Bon and then left.

52 days into the journey, a major problem occurred. A black Rottweiler with a brown muzzle jumped out of a bush and barked at the slaves. Then, all at once, 2 men with 2-inch beards, wielding muskets, soon came after and started shooting at us.

A slave in his 30s crouched low on the ground, then ran and grabbed one of the man's heels, which knocked him over. He fell hard enough that it made him unconscious.

An elderly slave rushed at the second man with his cane. The cane hammered the gun out of the guy's hand. Now, the guy was defenseless.

Some tall slaves jumped at him, throwing punches. They wrestled until the man got knocked out. A slave took the guns and bullets from both of them to later use as a hunting weapon.

It seemed that the slave hunters had caught up with the slaves.

Sadly, 2 people died from gunshot wounds. Thankfully, most of the people were a-ok.

In late March, the group officially reached Tennessee! For this part of their journey, they would have to go through some woodland. While in the woods, the group consumed a decent amount of food and water, thanks to Claira. She always knew what berries were consumable and where the closest freshwater stream was. People called her the "Nature Whisperer."

And before they knew it, the slaves had made it to their 2nd station. This time, the house was made of red brick with raspberry bushes in front. Strangely, the bushes were well-maintained in a woodland area such as Tennessee's. The door was metal with a brass knocker in the middle.

An old woman by the name of Janet Jukson, with gray hair in a plaid dress, appeared on the doorstep with a sour face. She grumpily said hello and explained that they had to be steady and calm while in her house. Some teenage slaves in the back grumbled at this notion.

Janet's house was untidy, with picture frames, yarn, plants, and cats lying around all over. As the teenage slaves came in, they were moving quickly, whooping, and shouting at each other. Then they understood why the old lady wanted them to be calm. The cats got amped up, then screeched and ran and soared through the air. The slaves ducked as these missiles of cats leaped across the room.

As the commotion was happening, Janet screamed at the slaves to get out of her house and not to come back again!

So the group slept outside a little way away from Janet's house on the cold, dirty ground.

The next day, the group continued their journey. Treking through Tennessee is hard because of its humid climate. Then, after 20 days, the group made it to Kentucky. They were glad to be out of the miserable, humid forest. In Kentucky, the group would have to be extra careful because slave catchers would be on high alert.

The group was supposed to go to the next station of a man named John Mellencomp, but for some reason, he moved away. The group would have to travel through Kentucky by the woods, where they were less prone to getting caught.

In Kentucky, the slaves couldn't pick berries anymore. They had to use the guns that they got from the slave hunters to shoot wildlife. Luckily, there were many animals in the forest. Their daily meal schedule consisted of birds for breakfast, deer for lunch, and buffalo for dinner. At times, if people were really hungry or needed a snack, they would eat whatever bugs they could find on the ground.

Hunting for such animals was hard. Usually, the women would stay at camp, building a fire. The way they did this was to start a fire, then hide. They did this so that if any slave hunters saw the smoke and attempted to catch slaves, they wouldn't get caught. Then, when the fire was down to coals, they could cook the raw meat over them.

On the other hand, the men were out hunting. They would split up into 2 groups, and each group would take 1 musket. A few men stayed behind to help and protect the women. Normally, the men would let Hudson do the shooting while they did the scouting. They did that because

Hudson had been hunting before and had experience compared to slaves who had been stuck in plantations.

After eating dinner, the group would sleep on the cold underbrush on the ground. Occasionally, they would cover themselves with pine needles as a variation of a blanket.

By very late August, the group arrived at the northernmost part of Kentucky. They would have to go to one more of the conductor's stations before they were free!

The group climbed a small hill and looked down at the very small town of Pauladorn, which had slave catchers around its perimeter. From the hill, you could see the border sign to the state of Indiana.

Some slaves mumbled about how they could get into the town without being caught. However, the last conductor had thought of this. Claira pulled a small note out of her back pocket and swiftly scanned it.

"Wait, folks. This note, given to me by the last conductor, says that I need to act like I'm your guy's owner and you're my slaves. Then we can get through the soldiers stationed down there. But can I please have the white man in the back come up front with me and pretend to be my "slaves'" overseer?" She echoed.

The man she was talking about was, of course, Hudson. Thus, he walked up front next to her. As the group started walking down the hill to Pauladorn, the slaves' hearts began hastily pumping.

When they made it to the main entrance to the town, a buff, German security guard with a wrinkly forehead wearing a *Pauladorn Security* badge greeted them in a suspicious tone. Claira explained how she was the owner of these slaves and that Hudson was their overseer. The guard

thought it was strange how small the town was and how many slaves Claira had, but he still let them pass.

They followed her in a single file line until they came to a red and white, 3 story house on the outskirts of town, comfortably close to the border. All of the windows on the house were draped except for a window at the tippy top of the house.

Claira excitedly rapped on the front door until an average-sized man with an interesting hairdo and a smile greeted them blissfully. He welcomed them into his home. The interior was very comforting. It had a large, carpeted room with a couch in the corner next to a shelf with pottery on display.

“I’ve been preparing for you guys to come here. You can see the floor is immaculate and spacious,” the man said. “Ow, my name is Billy Jouel. And if you're wondering, ‘Why can’t we just cross the border right now, because we are close to it?’ Because guards are guarding the border for any slaves trying to escape. But tonight, they will be leaving momentarily to have a short meeting in the meeting house. Then that’s when you’ll go.”

The group agreed to his plan and relaxed for the rest of the day. At 7 o’clock, the slaves went to sleep, waiting to be awoken.

Later That Night

The slaves were awoken, not by Billy, but by a loud pounding of a hammer on the outside of the front door. They lit an oil lamp and stood up. Many slaves made an effort to investigate the

noise. They found that the doors and windows had been barricaded by wooden planks from the outside. The sharp points of the nails for the boards were sticking out from inside the house.

10 minutes later, the group smelled a light whiff of smoke. Then it got stronger and stronger. Everyone screamed for Billy, but no response came.

Hudson decided to check for anything to help them. As he started descending the stairwell, he discovered a chilling paper hung on the wall. It read:

Say your last goodbyes to your loved ones because you are all going to die. I was never a conductor on the Underground Railroad. I was hired by a multitude of owners to pretend to be a conductor so I could catch you. But I've decided to kill off all of you because it would be such a hassle to get you guys back to your plantations. And I know those two white people in your group (Claira & Hudson) ***are not your owner or overseer. I've started a kerosean fire on the second floor. Don't try to escape because there is no way you can.***

-Billy Jouel

Now, you could visibly see smoke. Hudson skipped down the stairs and raised the alarm of the fire to the group as they desperately attempted to kick down the door. It was very smoky, to the point of lower visibility. Slaves put their mouths and noses into their thin, negro cloth shirts.

Men viciously punted at the door to break it down. After some time, it started to crack. Soon, a small hole was made. Then a huge one. But they still had to kick down the wooden barricades.

Fire had burned its way down the stairs and set half of the main floor on fire. The fire licked the ceiling and made burnt marks. The women scurried to unburnt corners of the room to

steer clear of it. The men broke down most of the barriers, large enough that adults could climb out.

In a matter of minutes, the building had been evacuated. Outside, you could see all of the barricaded windows except for a small, broken one that had a ladder leading to it. Billy most likely used it to start the fire. In addition, you could see that a great deal of the house had been engulfed by flames. The group gathered together, fairly adjacent to the house, and decided to just leave for Indiana while they were there.

They quietly ran a quarter mile to the border. In the distance, they witnessed the orange glow of Billy's house on fire. They ignored it and ran for the border. And Billy was right, there were no guards at the border!

As they neared 400 feet from Indiana, rangers on horses came at them from all sides. They circled them and stopped, then held shotguns into the crowd! Those guards were wearing *Pauladorn Security* badges, too.

One of the slave men held up the rifle they got and pointed it at the closest guard to him.

The guard in the front said, “Look at that puny gun!”

“It’s tiny but mighty!” screamed back the slave.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” exclaimed the guard. “If you can shoot that border sign from this far away, I’ll let all of you go. But, if you miss, then we’ll have to kill you all!”

“I accept,” replied the slave.

Everyone on the Underground Railroad gasped.

The slave got down on his knees and carefully aimed at the *n* in *Indiana* on the border sign. He could feel perspiration building on his forehead. He noticed the calm August breeze flowing on him. He took one last chance to aim and fired.

The bullet made a knocking sound on some wood, which signified the slave had hit the sign!!! The slaves whizzed past the horses and to the other side of the border.

As the last person made it through, the guards loaded their guns and fired at them.

The Saga Is To Be Continued